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Le labyrinthe de la cité radieuse. Les pérégrinations de Bérenger chez Ionesco

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Summary

In this study we have made an analysis of the Béranger-cycle, and more in particular of *Tueur sans gages*, focussed on some elements which seem to us of essential importance for the study of any literary text.

In the order in which they are dealt with these elements are: space, time, language and communication, reality and imagination. In the chapter on space we start from the Kantian idea that space is a creation of our mind. We have developed a contrast between the conceptions of *space* (espace) existing in our mind, and a *concrete place* (lieu) which constitutes an essential part of the world surrounding us, in which we are present with our body (cf. the Sartrian idea: "nous sommes toujours en situation"). We examine what are the consequences of the interaction between space and place for the stage and the space it occupies. There that interaction proves to become more penetrating than in "reality". The stage shows a Janus-head; on the one hand it is reality, on the other hand it refers continually to "somewhere else", which only exists in the imagination (and without which the stage is unable to function).

The space occupied by the stage is a physiological space, in which conceptions, in their own special way, acquire values and resonances which do not exist in mathematical space. The elementary spatial conceptions are not geometrically defined. Conceptions like left, right, high and low have no scientific basis, but are no less important for that matter.

Space is unthinkable without the concrete place, and the latter without the object, which only obtains its full meaning on the stage in a diachronic framework, having almost invariably a metonymical and a metaphorical function. It forms an island and a point

of support in space.

In Ionesco's plays these functions of the object are undermined. As a result one is placed in an uncertain world, which cannot be caught by perception only.

In the chapter on time, in which we take the Kantian ideas as our point of departure again, we see how time arranges our notions with the aid of the conceptions of succession and causality.

Time creates distance, but a "distance intérieure". Man and things are affected and destroyed by time. In a succession of symbols Ionesco shows us this process and, above all, makes us feel it.

In the life of the principal character Bérenger, and in any human life, crucial moments occur at which time seems to have come to a stop. Man seems to have been snatched away from matter and time and a feeling of perfect happiness comes over him. His being seems to be in perfect harmony with the world. The passing away of time with its disastrous consequences is no longer felt.

After his euphoria the main character returns to time and space, which with Ionesco constitute the labyrinth, hell, as they do with Kafka. He begins a desperate struggle to regain his lost happiness, paradise, thwarted by various anonymous forces, which eventually hand him over to the knife of "Le Tueur".

At the moment "his time" comes to a stop, not as a result of the force of imagination, but that of matter, his end is near.

Language and communication form the theme of the third chapter. We make a sharp distinction between two communication circuits characterizing the stage, an interior circuit between the characters within the stage-fiction, and an exterior circuit in which all the signs are functioning which, through the stage, are intended for the spectator.

In the Bérenger-cycle (and for that matter in Ionesco's entire work) language seems to have been given to man to veil his real intentions, to dominate, or to show his absolute lack of interest in somebody else.

In spite of all his faults and weaknesses, Bérenger, the principal character, appears to be a figure who cannot be ignored, among other things because of his authentic use of language.

Instead of bringing about communication language in general leads to misunderstandings as a result of a series of "wrong connections", the gravity of which sometimes becomes slightly less poignant because of its comic effect.

Extremely dangerous is the official language of a tyrannical authority. It is only a series of clichés, which is intended, not to lead to communication but to deception.

Moreover the language in the Bérenger-cycle (and also in many other works of Ionesco) sometimes seems to become an independent organism which "generates" itself and as a result seems to lose any contact with "reality". Formal connections seem to be sufficient to start this mechanism of "self-generation". Comic effects are the result. They reveal the subconscious motives of the speakers to those who understand well.

In our final chapter reality and imagination, language, space and time not only prove to be very closely related to each other, but they suppose each other to be there in an ever-changing field of tension. By using symbols, Ionesco tries in his Bérenger-cycle, to dissociate the stage from an existing reality and to emphasize the imagination in the theatrical performance.

Yet, by playing upon a collective (sub)conscious (Jung) and by using facts and situations derived from contemporary history as a background Ionesco succeeds in maintaining a firm relationship with "the reality" of the spectator.

In the Bérenger-cycle lack of imagination proves to lead invariably to contempt of and domination over one's fellow-men, as one cannot realise the latter's position. It generates anonymous forces like "l'Administration", behind which one can hide in order to evade one's responsibility. The individual who cannot adapt himself or refuses to do so, is threatened with destruction.

In the cycle Bérenger is that individual who opposes these anonymous forces and who shows at the same time the eternal battle of man between resignation to the world of matter and his aspiration to another world, the world of the dream and of the imagination, particularly the aesthetic imagination, a world out of reach of the compulsion of space, time and matter. Ionesco tries to usher us into this world. In that sense his drama is "théâtre de liberté".